

Message Text

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PAGE 01 FREETO 01697 311414Z POSS DUPE
ACTION AF-10

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FM AMEMBASSY FREETOWN
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INFO SECSTATE WASHDC 7757
AMEMBASSY CONAKRY

C O N F I D E N T I A L FREETOWN 1697

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, PINT, LI, SL
SUBJ: EFFECT OF ALLEGATIONS OF LIBERIAN ARMS SMUGGLING ON
BILATERAL RELATIONS WITH SIERRA LEONE

REF: (A) MONROVIA 3797, (B) FREETOWN 1623

1. AMERICAN DIPLOMATS LONG HAVE RECOGNIZED THAT ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL PITFALLS OF OPERATING IN SIERRA LEONE IS THE TENDENCY OF SOME LOCAL POLITICIANS TO TRY TO INVOLVE THE USG IN THEIR INTERNAL POLITICAL FIGHTS OR TO BLAME US FOR THEIR MISCALCULATIONS. LIBERIA AND OTHER NATIONS ARE NOT EXEMPT FROM THE SAME DANGERS. THAT PRESIDENT TOLBERT FELT A PERSONAL MESSAGE OF ASSURANCES TO STEVENS WAS IN ORDER AND THAT STEVENS FELT A PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT ON NEED FOR JOURNALISTIC RESTRAINT WAS NECESSARY WOULD SEEM TO INDICATE THAT THE EFFECT OF THE ALLEGATIONS HAD PASSED BEYOND THE STAGE OF A LOW LEVEL IRRITANT IN BILATERAL RELATIONS. BOTH ACTIONS WERE HELPFUL AND SINCE STEVENS' PRESS CONFERENCE (REFTEL B) NO FURTHER ALLEGATIONS HAVE APPEARED IN LOCAL MEDIA.

2. AS NOTED IN REFTEL B, PRINCIPAL PROPONENT OF THESE ALLEGATIONS IS FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER, NOW MINISTER OF JUSTICE
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AND ATTORNEY-GENERAL, FRANCIS MINAH, WHOSE "UNCLE" ABDULAI B. M. JAH, IS AMBASSADOR TO LIBERIA. MINAH IS A POWERFUL PERSONALITY IN SIERRA LEONE POLITICS. HE FREQUENTLY IS MENTIONED AS A POSSIBLE SUCCESSOR TO EITHER PRIME MINISTER KAMARA-TAYLOR OR VICE PRESIDENT S. I. KOROMA. AS THE PRINCIPAL AUTHOR OF THE NEW ONE PARTY CONSTITUTION HIS STOCK WITH STEVENS IS HIGH. HE IS A LOYAL SUPPORTER OF STEVENS AND

AS A MENDE AND FORMER SLPP PARLIAMENTARIAN WHO CROSSED TO THE APC YEARS AGO HIS SUPPORT IS PARTICULARLY VALUED BY STEVENS.

3. IN A PREVIOUS CONVERSATION WITH MINAH (FREETOWN 1498) MINAH TOLD BOTH AMBASSADOR LINEHAN AND DCM THAT LIBERIANS WERE SMUGGLING ARMS AND AMMUNITION TO THE OPPOSITION SLPP. WHETHER THESE REPORTS ARE TRUE IS ANOTHER MATTER. WE BELIEVE MINAH BELIEVES THE REPORTS ARE TRUE. STEVENS OBVIOUSLY HAS SOME RESERVATIONS ON THEIR ACCURACY AND VALIDITY, OTHERWISE HIS REACTION PROBABLY WOULD HAVE BEEN FAR DIFFERENT. NEVERTHELESS, THE DANGER ALWAYS EXISTS THAT SUCH ALLEGATIONS CAN BE WOVEN INTO A STORY TO CONVINCE THE PRESIDENT AND CABINET THAT BEHIND THEM LIES A FACTUAL BASIS.

4. WE BELIEVE STEVENS WANTS THE MANO RIVER UNION TO SUCCEED. WE BELIEVE HE WANTS CLOSER AND BETTER RELATIONS WITH LIBERIA, PARTLY BECAUSE HE SEES THIS AS A WAY OF OBTAINING INCREASED USG AND WESTERN ASSISTANCE. BUT HE GREATLY VALUES HIS POLITICAL SURVIVAL AND WE BELIEVE HE WOULD NOT HESITATE TO REACT STRONGLY IF HE FELT FACTIONS IN LIBERIA WERE ACTING AGAINST HIM.
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